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Philippine insurgents are turning down Soviet support

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Manila

Moscow has offered substantial military aid to communist insurgents in the Philippines, but the offer has been rejected, well-informed sources say.

The leadership of the Communist Party of the Philippines rejected the offer, the sources say, for a variety of practical and ideological reasons.

Although the party has moderated its Maoist stance in recent years, it views the Soviet Union with almost as much suspicion as it does the United States. The Filipino party opposes what it calls Soviet "expansionism" in Afghanistan and Cambodia.

Party sources also say they feel Soviet assistance would be counterproductive and difficult to arrange. Moscow's intervention in the crisis here, the party fears, would precipitate US military intervention in the guerrilla war. And, given the Philippines' remoteness, the problems of ensuring a regular supply of outside weaponry would be almost insurmountable.

"Our experience with arms smuggling has on the whole been pretty discouraging," said one party cadre.

So for the time being, the communist guerrillas concentrate on capturing and buying their weapons from the Philippine military. According to the New People's Army (the party's military branch), its guerrillas captured 1,680 rifles in 1984.

The Soviet offer is said to have been made early in 1985. It is the first sign of what the US has long feared: a Soviet effort to turn the crisis in the Philippines to its own advantage.

Although the conclusion of a recent US Senate report states that the Philippine insurgency "is still essentially supplied and financed from domestic sources," the report also said that "the ingredients are present for a possible upgrading of the [Soviet-Philippine Communist Party] relationship." The report, given by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence Nov. 1, also said that the Soviet mission in Manila had been expanded and that Soviet officials there are "actively making the rounds."

US concerns are compounded by other factors in the region. While the US military bases in the Philippines are increasingly under verbal attack by Filipino politicians, Moscow has consolidated its position in Vietnam, where it bases its Southeast-Asia air and naval operations at Cam Ranh Bay, US officials say.

The Soviet arms offer was made to the West European support organization of the clandestine National Democratic Front, the Philippine Communist Party's broad political-outreach organization. The Soviets are said to have offered communist guerrillas enough weapons to "consolidate their advantage" over the government troops.

Exact numbers of weapons were apparently not mentioned in the offer, but the phraseology may have been a reference to the Communist Party's plans to increase the fighting strength of its army — currently estimated at 32,000 — by 40 percent over the next three years.

The offer was relayed by the party's European support organization to the communist leadership in the Philippines, where it was rejected out of hand, the sources assert. Communist cadres assume that, had the offer been accepted, the weaponry may have been channeled through Moscow's close ally, Vietnam. The Vietnamese government possesses a large stock of US-made M-16 rifles left over from the Vietnam war, and both Philippines armed forces and guerrillas use the weapon.

The offer is described as the most concrete but not the first such overture by Moscow. The Soviets have approached the underground on a number of occasions over the past two years. Feelers have also come from Vietnam.

Several months after the Soviet offer, a Vietnamese official met with a Communist Party cadre, sources say. Although no aid was offered, the Vietnamese official did express interest in the party's relations with China and reportedly asked whether China was providing any aid. (Underground sources say it is not.) The discussion apparently went no further, and major differences between the Vietnamese and the Philippine Communist Party presumably remain. Hanoi is still suspicious of the Filipino party's Maoist tendencies, and the party is still opposed to Hanoi's invasion of Cambodia.

The party's continuing suspicion of Moscow does not, however, mean any softening of its hostility to the US. A National Democratic Front spokesman, in an interview last week, reiterated that the underground's demand for the removal of the US's Clark and Subic Bay bases was "definitely non-negotiable."

"We look on these bases as a violation of our territorial sovereignty," But, he added, the underground does not harbor "the personal kind of hatred towards the United States often ascribed to us." If the Communist Party eventually won power, the spokesman said, there would "still be room for trade and diplomatic relations with the US."

How much room, he implied, would depend on US actions over the next few years. A big first step in the right direction, he said, would be Washington's "complete distancing from the Marcos regime."

Reagan administration officials claim that US aid to Manila should not be viewed as support for President Ferdinand Marcos but as an effort to strengthen Philippine democratic institutions. Like many more-moderate Marcos opponents, the spokesman said that he views this argument with skepticism.

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If the US did distance itself from President Marcos and if it did eventually show willingness to work with a leftist government in the Philippines, economic relations between the two countries could be considerable, the spokesman claimed.

"We'll still need to borrow money — though hopefully on better terms. We'll still want to trade in raw materials and semi-processed goods. We'll need to buy machinery. The long legacy of US technology and economic presence here gives [the US] the inside track."

Asked why the guerrillas had not targeted US personnel or bases in the Philippines despite the communists' denunciation of the "US-Marcos dictatorship," the spokesman offered two reasons — one practical, one political. Communist guerrillas did not yet have the capability to inflict much damage on bases, the spokesman said. But more importantly, he added, the party realized that this too might precipitate US military intervention in the Philippines.